

Artweek, January 7, 1993.

Cross-Cultural Components

Oliver Jackson at Bomani Gallery

ALLAN M. GORDON

It would be helpful if the viewer of Oliver Jackson's recent sculpture at Bomani Gallery had a working knowledge of African art and aesthetics. This would enable the viewer to approach the work on levels other than the perception of it as essentially an "elegant," "tough," "expressionistic" solution to art-making problems.

The work is all these things, but unless the African component is taken into consideration, the entire issue of content is minimized or completely missed.

Nor is the viewer apt to appreciate another issue which engages Jackson and other Western artists who make an ancestral claim to African art and culture: how can the artist selectively choose from an array of non-Christian motifs, forms and ideas, and translate them into viable and convincing meaning that would make any kind of sense within a contemporary Western, Christian ethos? It ain't easy.

Coincidentally, it was a similar problem faced by Sandro Botticelli, Michelangelo Buonarroti and other Italian artists of the quattro- and cinquecentos. The renaissance artists wanted to use the art

from the ancient pagan past, compatible with Christianity. The mystical Neoplatonism of Plotinus paralleled the mysticism of Christianity and eventually provided an aesthetic and philosophical connecting link for the artists.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) Jackson has no such ready-made bridge to connect Western traditions to the multilayered African cultures. Leopold Seghor's concept of

Negritude perhaps comes as close as anything, but is an introduction that does not go far enough.

What Jackson does have is the tradition of modernism, its emphasis on formalistic devices, and his own gut instincts. But if his paintings are any indication, formalism alone is not enough. A fairly explicit content has always been a crucial aspect of the artist's work.

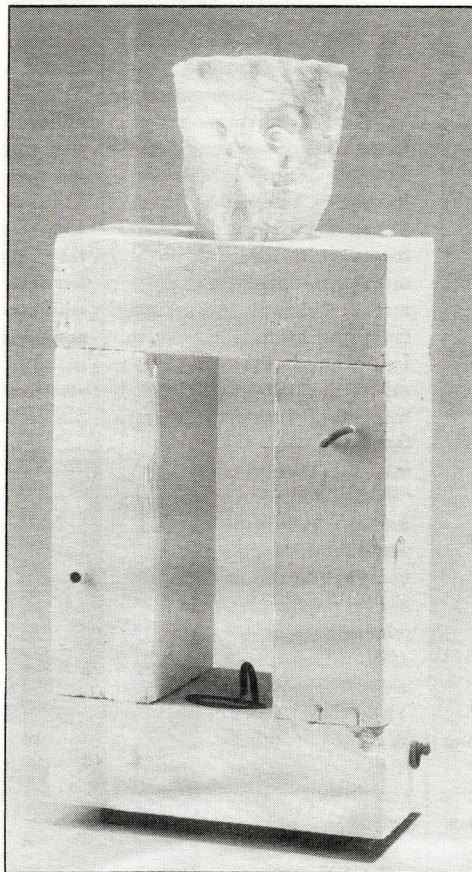
The so-called *paint people* found in his paintings would be mostly decorative and emblematic design elements if they were not developed from personal references that are either autobiographical (or referential to jazz) in nature or at least aspects of a cosmological/theological framework that Jackson thoroughly understands and also is accepted by the society in which he lives.

This is what makes, for example, the *Chair People* problematic. Even when he is unable to use the reference of the chair

frame itself to "slip past" and become a metaphor for the figure (*Chair People No. 9*), because the chair remains too insistent, the allusion and overt reference to African *Nkonde* figures can not transcend the differences between belief systems existing between that which spawned the original and the new creations that can only hint at a continuum that does not necessarily exist on the level that Jackson suggests.

What remains is a piece that is almost self-consciously aware of its precedents in both African art and western modernism.

For the concerned viewer and others with a more vested interest, Jackson's work offers a mini-compendium of possibilities which exist in viewing African art as source and inspiration. Hopefully it can help put an end to the Maasai warrior and/or African-female-with-a-basket-on-her-head syndrome as viable derivatives.



Oliver Jackson, *Untitled*, 1990, marble, wood, paint, iron, 55" x 27" x 15", at Bomani Gallery, San Francisco. (Photo: M. Lee Fatherree.)